My Teaching Philosophy: A Working Hypothesis and Critical Practice

A lifelong educator, I've taught at every level of the Ontario educational system, including elementary and secondary school, community college, and university. What drew me to an academic career was the exciting opportunity to combine my passion for research with my love of teaching. At Ryerson the synergy between my scholarly work and my teaching practice has been fostered by an institutional commitment to applied knowledge and experiential learning and the rare privilege of developing new programs with innovative curricula for twenty-first century students.

For me, teaching has always been a form of applied learning and experimentation not unlike my ongoing work in digital humanities research. One of the most exciting fields to emerge in recent years, digital humanities has been defined by Alan Galey as “thinking through making.” This is an equally apt description of the critical work that goes into a carefully conceived syllabus and thoughtfully designed assignments. In both kinds of critical practice, the focus must be on the user, and the user’s ability to interact critically and creatively with the material in relation to new discoveries, an existing databank of shared knowledge, and innovative adaptation and application. Whether designing a single course or developing the curriculum for an entire program, I try to take into account how individual goals and learning outcomes connect to larger concerns and systems, from the individual and departmental to the institutional. Building a course, a curriculum, or a program is a dynamic, collaborative, and public hypothesis about cultural knowledge and democratic citizenship.

While curricular design may be an innovative form of critical problem solving and a creative response to societal need, the classroom is the lab in which these theoretical systems are tested. Each year when I redesign my courses and their assignments I take into account student feedback on evaluations so that I can build on what worked and adjust what didn’t. My course design and pedagogy are tested in the interactive space of the classroom. As a Humanities scholar, human culture is my object of study; as a Humanities professor, I want to ensure the human guides my classroom practice. To this end I aim to teach individuals, rather than masses, and work hard to learn as many names (and personalities) as possible. I aim to teach that words are never innocent, and that ideas have power. And that each individual student has ideas that matter, ideas that contribute to public knowledge and cultural practice, ideas that have ethical and social impact. Crucially, I want students to understand that in twenty-first century Toronto, the past continues to live and breathe in the present—their personal present—as it does across our global communities. Tested annually, these aims guide my selection of course texts and delivery models and shape my design of assignments and marking rubrics.

When I first joined the professoriate, I imagined that the synergy between research and teaching had to do with designing and delivering courses in my own area of expertise: nineteenth-century literature and visual culture, particularly illustrated books. I quickly learned that teaching and learning are not unidirectional: students bring a knowledge base to the classroom that I need to tap into. To remind myself, I started to write LLLL at the top of my lecture notes: Listen and Learn, Lorraine! When I began to work in the emerging field of digital humanities, I recognized that the synergy between teaching and research could help me realize my classroom aims in exciting new ways. My critical practice in digital pedagogy is motivated by two pedagogical principles:

1) Students are producers, not merely consumers, of scholarly knowledge; and
2) Humanities courses in the twenty-first century have an obligation to prepare students to be thoughtful contributing citizens by teaching digital literacy in addition to our traditional mandates of textual literacy, cultural literacy, critical thinking, and close reading.
Digital humanities is fundamentally about open access and creative knowledge mobilization within interactive communities. Translated into the classroom, DH pedagogy validates students as cultural producers, enacting the thesis that what they think matters because their work contributes to public discourse. Since 2010, I’ve substituted the traditional English essay for digital exhibits in my undergraduate classes. Unlike the research essay (the standard humanities assessment tool), the digital assignment asks students to write for a defined audience and a clear purpose (considered by composition theorists to be the founding conditions of effective writing). Publishing their research findings for online readers motivates students to research carefully, think critically, write clearly, and edit painstakingly. Building a digital exhibit for publication on the web positions students as knowledge producers whose creative and intellectual labor is being shared in a permanent and public, rather than ephemeral and private, forum. Their online publication also has another purpose that moves it beyond the classroom and the course: as an authored work students can feature in their resume or e-portfolio, the digital exhibit becomes meaningfully connected to their long-term career aspirations.

In my view, it’s not only the methodological skills of digital research and writing that are pedagogical imperatives for the twenty-first century literature classroom, but also the underlying practice of digital humanities work in general. DH practice is socially collaborative, outward-looking, and community-building in its commitment to public visibility and open access, and critically creative in its juxtaposition of media, voices, times, and places. “Thinking through making” in building a Digital Exhibit raises questions of authorship and audience, credibility and authority. It aims to make both students and professor critically aware of our social, economic, and political roles and responsibilities in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Knowing that, regardless of students’ chosen careers, almost all their communication, research, and creative work post graduation will take place in online environments of various kinds, I feel a responsibility to train students in digital literacy. This includes not only knowing how to locate, evaluate, and use material available online, but also how to communicate and publish material online by using effective writing strategies, digital tools, and ethical practices. My course delivery model reflects this experiential approach to teaching and learning, combining lecture-discussion with skills-building workshops, some of which take place in the computer lab.

If teaching for me is about human social relationships, I’m also very aware of the situatedness of knowledge. As a Victorianist, I want my students to care deeply about the cultural past; if they don’t see the point of reading a nineteenth-century novel or an illustrated fairy tale—if they don’t see how this study connects to their lived experience or career aspirations—I’m just talking to myself. So I’m always looking for ways to demonstrate, in meaningful ways, how the past continues to live in, and act upon, the present. To this end, I make use of field trips to local Toronto spaces and events that connect with course material, such as the Arts and Letters Club, the Arthur Conan Doyle Room at the Toronto Reference Library, and the Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Books at the Toronto Public Library. I take students to see research in action at the Faculty of Arts’ Modern Literature and Culture Centre and Centre for Digital Humanities, and expose them to RULA’s Special Collections and Archives. I introduce them to primary research and material culture by involving them in curating books from own Children’s Literature Archive or digital editions from The Yellow Nineties Online.

My graduate course in Modernity and the Visual: Image and Text (LM8942) has frequently held its final class in the library of the Arts and Letters club, where students present on what they have gained from studying visual/verbal relations historically, theoretically, and critically. In order to put their historical learning and theoretical knowledge into critical practice, I ask my grad students to design a visual context and layout for a Victorian text of their choosing. These creative works, accompanied by an artist’s statement that provides an informed rationale for aesthetic decisions, are published each year.
on the Literatures of Modernity website; in some cases, incoming students have told me that these online works inspired them to join the program and/or take my course. I’ve also been delighted to meet students who’ve chosen the Literatures of Modernity or Communication and Culture program because an undergraduate English course at their home university drew on materials from The Yellow Nineties Online (which I co-edit), inspiring them to learn more about both fin-de-siècle illustrated magazines and digital humanities research.

In teaching graduate students and working with the research team at the Centre for Digital Humanities my scholarly work and pedagogical practice overlap in complex ways that foster a real mutuality in teaching and learning. Committed as I am to promoting and inspiring student research, I enjoy the individualized learning opportunities offered in supervision, whether it be a doctoral dissertation, a master’s MRP, a GA in the classroom, or an RA in the CDH. One summer I held an ad hoc series of small workshops for my two University Research Opportunity Scholars and other interested RAs on topics raised by the students’ curiosity, including physical bibliography and textual methods (usually a grad topic), prosody and poetics, and grad applications and grant-writing. It gives me great satisfaction to know that those UROs went on to pursue graduate studies in library and information science and English studies, and that former has just been hired by University of Guelph Library.

The role of mentor in the professor/graduate student relationship is one I take very seriously; current and former students know this is an ongoing commitment, not time-stamped with a “best before” date. Here my critical practice involves modeling the profession, collaborating in research and teaching, and engaging in student research through extensive feedback and encouragement. I have co-presented papers at scholarly conferences with my doctoral students and am currently in the process of co-authoring a chapter for the peer-reviewed Feminist Debates in the Digital Humanities with my current Communication and Culture PhD student. This fall I also had the privilege and pleasure of collaborating with her in the undergraduate classroom, guiding her in the creation and assessment of assignments and the delivery of class materials. In 2010 I collaborated in digital humanities pedagogy with my first doctoral student, Constance Crompton. I am proud that she is now an Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at UBC Okanagan and launching a CFI-funded Humanist Data Lab there, where she will train the next generation of English researchers and digital scholars.

In training future researchers and citizens, my scholarship and teaching come together in especially meaningful ways. If, as Jerome McGann posits in Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web, “[t]he next generation of literary and aesthetic theorists who will most matter are people who will be at least as involved with making things as with writing text” (19), I want my students to be ready to be leaders in this twenty-first century critical challenge.